

The Men Of The Militias: Then and Now

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Abstract

This article explores militia activism as it flourished in the 1980s and '90s, and its recent return to the American landscape since the early 2000s. The exploration is guided by an understanding of how ideology works to propel identity politics; in short examining militia activism provides the alibi for unpacking ideology in the trenches. The article first briefly situates contemporary militia activism within the framework of American political history, namely Federalist and Anti-Federalist debates. A God-Constitution-Liberty triad is presented to illuminate how militia members, then and now, hold together their symbolic order. Next, ideal types are explained to identify variations in militia positions. The Patriotic Liberal represents the milder form of militia activism, while the Patriotic Reconstructionist clings to conspiracy theories as he calls for more radical solutions to what ails American political life. Finally, it is pointed out that militia members are not so-called 'weekend warriors' and are therefore here to stay.

Introduction

Once again, America finds itself in the midst of a domestic terror threat posed by the more extreme elements within the militia movement. Prior to this most recent increase in militia activism, the mid-1990s provided the background upon which militia members staged their calls for a return to an idealized American past. Indeed, the culmination came in the April 19, 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building by Timothy McVeigh. Current manifestations of militia activism are still mild compared to what took place then; whether or not that will continue to be the case remains to be seen.

Certainly, the potential for an intensification of militia-led violence is present. With the election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2009, current militia activism carries with it underlying racial tensions fueled by demographic changes pointing to the continued shift toward a minority Caucasian population in the U.S. Having said that, many militia organizations emphasize they are not racist and those carrying such messages should look elsewhere for affiliation. It is, however, undeniable that, with few exceptions, militia activism can be characterized as an angry white men's movement.

Although the contemporary militia movement is unique in many ways, it does have strong connections to similar movements throughout American history. Contrary to what many would like to admit, the militia movement is not alien to American political life. Beginning with the Anti-Federalists during the founding period, there has always been a group of patriotic Americans who feel obligated to guard our liberty against a corrupt federal government. Although the names of these citizen-groups have changed--Anti-Federalists, Minutemen, Militias--their position in debates concerning the role of government has remained the same.

For many Americans, Cold War narratives provided the screen upon which they projected a love of country against an endemic evil. For militia-men, it has been no different. Minutemen in the 1960s trained to prepare for the day when guerilla warfare would be necessary to stem the tide of a communist invasion. Today, militia-men speak of the One World Order led by the United Nations and accompanied by socialist American politicians who have sold our liberty to foreign powers. Many paramilitary groups gained momentum in the 1960s and 1980s. Spurred by the civil rights movement in the 1960s, which provided a shock to the Right, and Reagan's anti-government rhetoric in the 1980s, groups like the Minutemen and militias found new life under the themes of outside invasion and government corruption. And even as most people were no longer convinced of the imminence of invasion from an external power, paramilitary groups shifted only their characters; the plots remained the same.

In order to better understand contemporary militia activism, it will be helpful to develop a sense of where militias fit into American political thought and how variations in militia activism are manifested. Once that has been done, we can move onto an exploration of two ideal types--the Patriotic Liberal and

the Patriotic Reconstructionist--that will give voice to the major distinctions between current militia groups.¹ Again, it is important to place militias within the framework of Anti-Federalism in America; it is in that discourse where their seduction by government refutes accusations that militia members are, by and large, government haters who work to destroy government in all its federal forms.

Anti-Federalism Then and Now

The early Anti-Federalists viewed the Constitution as a gateway to corruption because it centralized power and took the decision-making process away from states. Today, militia members find confirmation of this fear of corruption through centralized power. Although they accept the Constitution that was forged by their predecessors as the law of the land, they believe power has become so centralized that the Constitution can no longer act as a check against abuses of power. Rather, in the militia-man's eyes it has become a means for shielding those abuses and for protecting elites who manipulate Constitutional decrees for their own benefit.

The militia-man is the contemporary voice of the Anti-Federalists, pointing out that usurpation of the rule of law is the first sign of corruption in the American body-politic, and that the engine behind this corruption is unchecked change. Militia members view themselves in the same way the Anti-federalists before them viewed themselves: as the true defenders of the principles under which the Revolution was fought. The Federalists, however, accused them of being just the opposite. Today, militia members view themselves as suffering the same fate. They are accused of being a threat to government and to the Union when, in fact, they claim to be the true defenders of the Union.

The Anti-Federalists never liked the name they were given. They saw themselves as the true Federalists. The name "Anti-Federalist" had too many negative connotations that left them in the position of looking like the bad guys. This is why militia members today become infuriated when critics label them anti-government and government haters. They stress over and over that they are anti-tyranny and they love government and want to preserve the Union. In their eyes, they fight the elitism that comes with an over-

centralization of power and that breeds corruption. They are romantic idealists who take the words they choose from the Founding Fathers (e.g., Henry, Jefferson) literally.

Indeed, Patrick Henry's words ring true to today's militia-man and many members quote him frequently.

I have lived long enough to become an old fashioned fellow: Perhaps an invincible attachment to the dearest rights of man, may, in these refined enlightened days, be deemed old fashioned: If so, I am contended to be so: I say, the time has been, when every pore of my heart beat for American liberty, and which, I believe, had a counterpart in the breast of every true American.²

Sentiments like these point to the romantic idealism of the Anti-Federalists and militia members. They are nostalgic for an imaginary past and work to reconstruct that which gives meaning to life and places them in the position of the true defenders of American greatness.

The Anti-Federalists claimed the Federalists were carrying the federal principle too far and thus were undermining it. The Anti-Federalists wanted "a continuance of each distinct sovereignty--and are anxious for such a degree of energy in the general government, as it will cement the union in the strongest manner."³ The Federalists, the Anti-Federalists argued, wanted to drop state sovereignty in order to create an unquestionable center of power. In this sense, rather than an attack on government itself, the Anti-Federalists were challenging those they saw as threatening federalism by dismissing state sovereignty as key to the union's strength. Their challenges, then, were lodged against those who were a threat to government and not at the concept of government.

It is the same with many militias today. It is true some members are simply angry and aim their reactions at government itself, missing the spirit of Anti-Federalist activism. Most, however, act as did the Anti-Federalists in early America. They work to protect/restore a republican form of government against those whom they believe work to centralize power to the point of despotism. Militia members, like their Anti-Federalist predecessors, want to make government accessible to the people and accountable to state authority. Rather than the federal government being the Sovereign ruling over individual (ized) states, they view the federal government as an extension of sovereign

states working to coordinate state activity and securing defense from outside threats so as to strengthen the union.

In form, the Anti-Federalists were agrarian democrats. They were, as militia members are today, Populists facing off against an elite they viewed as enveloped by a lust for power. Thus, elites could no longer be trusted to look out for the best interests of those in small communities living life as it was meant to be lived--under God's umbrella of authority and protection. Elites were not responsive to the public will and therefore the possibility of moral redemption through politics was lost. In fact, politics was now a vehicle leading to corruption and an abuse of power at the expense of the people. Indeed, militia members today see themselves as having picked up the Anti-Federalist fight for economic and moral justice against corrupt elites that defines American Populism.

From the early days of American history, Anti-Federalism has been a language of republicanism (local democracy) over mass democracy. Through the small republican community, the Anti-Federalists sought to nourish participation in political processes and to prevent abuses of power. Anti-Federalism was, in this sense, its own form of communitarianism. It was a fight for grassroots community building away from government impositions of forced community.

“Anti-Federalist theory at its best was designed to inhibit or even prevent just such a malaise with its own ethic of participation, decentralization, public happiness, and republican virtue.”⁴ Militia rhetoric is no different. Members continually speak about democracy fostering a tyranny of the few while republicanism fosters virtue and widespread participation by the people in government. “Political liberty, in any event, requires a high degree of virtue; many great men, including some of America’s Founding Fathers, have written and spoken of this. Moreover, since a society racked by rampant and rising crime is a society afflicted with one or more moral or social ills, it is also a society headed for despotism.”⁵

To Anti-Federalists and militia-men alike, democracy fosters private communitarianism. Groups are left on their own to do whatever they want with no regard for the welfare of others. The wealthy can use privacy as a way to accumulate more wealth for themselves with no reciprocity within the community required. The Anti-Federalists did not complain the most about

a loss of individual rights, although this was no doubt important. Rather, they complained first about the “usurpation of local authority, and the rights of communities to govern themselves.”⁶

Tyranny, then, is when government reserves action for itself and banishes people from the public realm, locking them into minding their own private business. Republicanism, on the contrary, gives every citizen the right to become a participator in the affairs of government. In this sense, militia members today do not want a revolution but a devolution. Liberalism was not America’s first post-Biblical language. “*Republicanism*, with its emphasis on the priority of the community and local forms of public association and participation was the primary language of American political discourse throughout the early life of the country.”⁷ This is why moderate militia organizations today emphasize public service and community involvement. They are the contemporary republican communitarians checking the evils of rampant individualism under a democracy that emphasizes private ownership and leaves governing to the abstract and distant realm of federal politicians. Centralization of power decreases opportunities for citizen participation in public affairs because power is no longer dispersed among various state and local political communities.

Contemporary Militia Foundationalism

Militia ideologies center around a triad of God, Constitution, and Liberty. This triad defines the life that should be and creates the (imaginary) picture of what is attainable if we would only actualize its content. In this sense, ideology works to crystallize the boundaries of an alienated group’s imaginary. It is the glue that pieces together the necessary components for actualizing and thus suspending a will to believe.

Conveniently, the signifiers of militia ideologies--the God-Constitution-Liberty triad--naturally flow one from the other. God chose America to be the place of His experiment to create a model nation for the rest of the world. Because of this proclamation, He anointed leaders to construct the document that gave the parameters of the nation. The Constitution is God’s entrance on the political scene. It is the Bible extended into nation building and it secures the success of God’s experiment if, and only if, people apply it as was intended--with a fundamentalist’s fervor. Finally, because God intended His

children to be free and thus endowed them with free-will, Liberty is the natural extension of Life under His umbrella. God's experiment cannot fail if people will only adhere to His guidelines as outlined in the Constitution. In the militia-man's eyes, clean images of the America that used to be point to a time when most lived under the authority-umbrella of God's willed (experimental) blueprint. Unfortunately, however, as government officials began to stray from God's blueprint and fall under "alien" influences, the umbrella began to leak and God's experiment was forever threatened. In an ironic twist, it is now government officials who provide militia members with images of delinquents working to usurp God's plan. And by locating the problem in the government, militia members are able to mask the fact that their posited umbrella always already leaked—even before it was opened.

Although variations in militia ideologies exist, the God-Constitution-Liberty triad is what ties all militia groups together. And because the Constitution is the (biblical) blueprint for God's experiment, it is the focal point that mobilizes most members. The Constitution is the earthly Anchor and it alone signifies reality. It is the background upon which appearances can be placed and through which their deception is revealed. When it comes to the Constitution, militia members are, across the board, fundamentalists, who cling to the concepts found within the document as closely as many do to the Bible. In the end, they seek a return to the (ir) Constitution and to the oath to defend it. They believe corruption in government runs deep. Many believe judges knowingly make unconstitutional rulings out of a fear that ruling against precedent would cause the collapse of our judicial system under its own corruption.

For most militia members, God's primary position in their ideology-triad provides the alibi for their convictions and grants them the space to assume their beliefs. Following a long rhetorical tradition, militia members assume a God-figure and a divinely ordained Constitution. The work of questioning is already done. It need not take place any further, for God provides our beginning point of authority and confidence. In this sense, God acts as a philosophical bypass mechanism. Self-reflexivity is not necessary because God has removed doubt (questioning), and the need to worry when/if doubt is present, from the militia member's repertoire of (re) action. As He is for many Americans, so God is for most militia members; the weld which brings together the space

between doubt and the will to a justified existence. Indeed, it is through a belief in God that militia members position themselves as the primary and privileged protectors of God's chosen project, a Constitutional America which grants liberty to all those who are willing to live within its boundaries.

Behind the commitment to Constitutionalism lies the traditional debate within American political thought between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. Although militia members do not overtly frame their movement in this context, it is clearly relevant. They are the contemporary Anti-Federalists. Like many other Americans they are concerned about government officials who have gone astray and are unable to control their lust for power. They recognize that the Constitution is a document of fear and see the government's usurping of it as a sign of its corruption--the same kind of corruption that engendered the American Revolution.

Many militia concerns are framed in the terms of current political debates revolving around the role of the federal government. But because the militia members are fundamentalists and anti-federalist decentralizers, "mainstream debaters" are quick to place distance between themselves and militia organizations. Indeed, Constitutional fundamentalism is what makes militias distinctive. They defend fourth amendment rights which are curbed in the name of the drug war and oppose an anti-terrorism bill that gives the government even more power to monitor its citizens and easily label them terrorists. They see these actions as a direct and immediate threat to their Constitutional liberty granted by God.

Militia members also claim their legitimacy from the Second Amendment to the Constitution and from an institutionalized historical tradition under which militias have operated at various times in American history. In the colonial period, the militia played an integral role in taming the land during the conflict with Native Americans. Because large standing armies were a symbol of oppression that caused many Americans to flee the old world, militias became the main line of defense for many. A fear of governmental corruption convinced many Americans to allow only a limited role for a professional army, which was seen as necessary only to guarantee secured seacoasts and to tame the frontier. The role of citizen-militias in defending America, however, was short-lived. Those who favored building an American empire began to use the Militia Act of 1792 as ammunition in their fight to establish a professional

army solely under the control of the federal government. They criticized the militia as ineffective in the War of 1812 and pressured politicians to dissolve the militia or to place it under federal control.

Uncovering Militia Camouflage

The proliferation of Patriot groups across America in the 1990s got its momentum in the early to mid 1980s. Patriots felt that, in many ways, Ronald Reagan spoke for them and this granted legitimacy to their cause. There was finally a President who was willing to combat America's enemies from within and without, the enemy from within being a menacing federal government and the enemy from without being, of course, communism. In addition, they believed Reagan was a politician in the anti-federalist mold, who would act on his beliefs by returning power to the states. Later, however, many became disenchanted with his economic agenda and went looking for another politician who would combine anti-federalist viewpoints with nationalist economic policies. Patriots did not have to wait too long for that man to come along. As Pat Buchanan began to emerge on the public scene, Patriots, and others frustrated with the rhetoric of internationalism, turned their attention toward him.

Anti-Federalists and the more moderate Patriotic Liberal militia-men are liberal communitarians--civic republicans. They are liberal in the belief that the end of government is the securing of individual liberty. They are communitarians in the sense that they believe only a local government organization can secure what is best for the people within its domain and can provide people with access to meaningful participation in the communal process of decision-making. To them, confidence in government and its laws is nourished only when government is accessible to the people and represents their needs, which might differ from the needs of those in another state. Union, not unity, is their motto. Uniform policies imposed on all states would only work to alienate people from government. They would no longer be able to view government as looking out for their needs and thus individual liberty would be sacrificed to uniformity at the hands of centralized power structures.

Specifically, the Patriotic Liberal militia-man best represents the civic republican with a libertarian twist, not unlike Jefferson and Henry. He is

still confident that the content and form of the American government are intact and are just in need of adjustment. In his eyes, it is his duty to hold government officials accountable to the people they serve and to motivate an apathetic populace to become involved in institutional politics, e.g., voting, lobbying politicians for desired change, and serving one's community through involvement in civic organizations.

In short, the Patriotic Liberal represents the pure of the pure in the militia movement. Involvement in a militia gives the Patriotic Liberal a sense of purpose and bolsters his will to believe in the purposeful life. For people like him, a life without purpose leaves only the abyss. But unlike the born-again Christian who turns to charismatic religion for a sense of meaning and belonging, the Patriotic Liberal turns to militia activism in search of the perceptual tools which aid in defining the life that matters. He is the true religious martyr who would rather be sacrificed for the cause than take up arms and sacrifice others. It is images of the yeoman vigilantly protecting his country that propel the Patriotic Liberal's involvement in militia imaginaries.

The Patriotic Reconstructionist, on the other hand, is the recombinant form of early Anti-Federalism as it meets contemporary Christian conservatism. The platform of state's rights found within Anti-Federalism is the basis of the Reconstructionist's criticism of the federal government, but the arena for a maximization of diversity has shrunk. This is because he believes the American form of government has been taken over by alien powers, thereby corrupting the very foundation of American greatness. Minor adjustments are not enough, and armed resistance is inevitable. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Because the Reconstructionist is under a mandate from God to purify the social arena and to rebuild America as God ordained it to be, tolerance is not an operative word in his vocabulary. Unlike the Patriotic Liberal who side-steps issues revolving around the relation of morality to the state in order to avoid direct confrontation, the Patriotic Reconstructionist closes the door to civil society and privileges declaratory morality over experiential morality. If the Patriotic Reconstructionist had his way, notions of compromise in political discourse would be replaced with the burnt flesh of those who must be sacrificed in order to achieve purity under the banner of God's America.

The Patriotic Liberal's activism is always already marked by a willingness to compromise in order to maintain his occupancy of the responsible position

regardless of whom he encounters. In fact, he is the consummate liberal because of his acceptance of the social compromise formation. In contrast, the Patriotic Reconstructionist is, at least in his rhetorical realm, the no-compromise monger who can be associated with the Pat Buchanan style of populism. If at all possible, he wishes to maintain a position of responsible citizenship as others look at him, but when necessary he abandons this position to maintain devotion to the cause. Contrary to the Patriotic Liberal, who is continually plagued by doubt about his own claims to a Truth-vocabulary, the Patriotic Reconstructionist evinces no conflict in his psyche and in his ability to access Truth. For him, the question is never whether or not to remain in the responsible position. Rather, the question is, when will the times demand that I cast away responsibility so as to advance the cause ?

Although militia members vary in their stances regarding similar issues, at their core they share a desire to be recognized by the government they poise themselves against. The motivation for both types is identity formation; what differs is the degree to which each demands a response to their activism from government officials. The Patriotic Liberal is content to work within the system for change while the Patriotic Reconstructionist (rhetorically) begs for a confrontation with an alien form of government. Inexhaustible resentment fuels militia activism. Despite their differences, Patriotic Liberals and Patriotic Reconstructionists are both romantic idealists who are resentful that they are being robbed of life as it was meant to be in God's anointed America.

A focus on education over violence is what separates the Patriotic Liberal from the Patriotic Reconstructionist. While the Patriotic Liberal sees violence as the last line of defense and as, most likely, unnecessary if citizens cling to the first amendment, the Patriotic Reconstructionist sees violence as inevitable. Because of his focus on education over violence, the Patriotic Liberal downplays the conspiracy theories off which the Reconstructionist feeds. The Patriotic Liberal often refers to United Nations involvement in American affairs, but he rarely, if ever, extends this involvement into a One World Government conspiracy theory. He is familiar with these conspiracy theories and he sometimes plays with them. In the end, however, because he has experienced a revival in his life, he is bound to the responsible path and therefore polices his play with excess. The militia movement is for him what Christianity was for St. Paul; a safe-haven where the repentant sinner can go for nourishment after

being knocked off his horse.

Given the fact that the Patriotic Reconstructionist's view of present day America comes through the lense of conspiracy theories, it is no wonder America appears alien. Like the Patriotic Liberal, the Reconstructionist's view of the America that should be comes from the Constitution. Contrary to the Patriotic Liberal, however, his image of the America that is comes through the lenses of conspiracy theories used as evidence proving his message of America's decline and takeover by alien forces.

Because of his sense of urgency, the Reconstructionist is willing to incorporate almost anyone into the battle. He has no problem with women on the front lines and, although he is a Christian, he often downplays Christianity in his rhetoric in the hope of attracting more freedom fighters into the militia ranks. In this sense, just as Marxists claimed the popular front in the battle against Nazism, so does the Patriotic Reconstructionist promote a patriotic front in his battle against One World Government.

Like the Patriotic Liberal, the Reconstructionist dislikes military involvement in local law enforcement. But unlike the Patriotic Liberal, the Patriotic Reconstructionist extends the military image to the United Nations and adds that the United States military is now under the control of the U.N. He is disturbed that foreign powers are allowed to train on American soil as U.S. military forces are merged with U.N. peace-keeping troops. The Reconstructionist views the U.N. as foreign to what America stands for and thus sees its presence on (what used to be pure) American soil as an affront to our liberty. Therefore, the fact that a U.N. memorial exists in San Francisco points to the slow move towards a U.N. takeover of our country. He emphasizes the takeover has been underway for quite some time and we must act now if America is to be rebuilt.

One is overwhelmed with the material presented in militia literature and when an outsider tries to make it fit together the task ends in frustration. This is the point, it does not all fit together unless one subscribes to the stories generated by conspiracy theories. Without their welds, which secure elements that do not fit together on their own, the outsider is easily lost in an excess of insignificant material. It is only with their welds and with the conspiracy lenses that the story comes together and appears as a unified narrative in spite of the numerous holes it contains. It is the investment in the conspiracy theories

that acts as the currency lending coherency to the circulation of (sometimes) incongruent, and always fragmentary, information. That is not to say all the information compiled by Reconstructionists is false. Indeed, this is not the point because when it comes to his ideological stance appearances are all that matter ... regardless of whether they point towards fact or fiction.

The search for an originary identity permeates American life and manifests itself in social organizations and institutions--e.g. the media and the militia--that work to secure images of the normal citizen, the real patriot, the true Christian, or whatever the image may be. These projections further interpellate us into corresponding belief-systems which shield us from the contagious, outside other. Indeed, identity politics is one more way to access the tools necessary to achieve (perceptual) security where ambiguity prevails.

Rising membership in groups like militias, as reported by such organizations as the Anti-Defamation League,⁸ point to our intensified political times. The fact that ideologically-based groups continue to flourish illustrates the alienation many in society are experiencing. On the one hand, there are still those who feel the two-party system offers an opportunity to choose candidates who will represent their views. On the other hand, however, there are those who feel candidates differ very little, if at all, and that government officials and their supporters do little to address their concerns. With this in mind, it appears that politics is back “en-vogue.” It is in the political arena where battle lines are being drawn between hegemonic ideologically-based groups and non-hegemonic ideologically-based groups.

Clearly, many involved in militias are not there as a hobby. They are fundamentalists who see our liberty at stake and feel an obligation to fight to preserve it against what they perceive as alien government officials wrapped in their own pursuit of power. Militia members see politicians as Jefferson did. That is, they are “at market” and until this changes our liberties are at risk and, in their eyes, membership in patriot groups will continue to rise. For this reason, most members are not going to disappear as many hope. Because their resentment is inexhaustible, they are here to stay.

¹ The ideal types are based on field research I conducted as a non-participant observer at militia meetings, and on individual interviews with militia members in 1996 and 2008. The organizations I had contact with were largely based in Arizona, Colorado, Florida,

Illinois, Indiana, Montana, New Mexico, Ohio, and Wyoming.

² Patrick Henry, Speech in the Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 5, 1788.

³ Herbert J. Storing, What the Anti-Federalists Were For: The Political Thought of the Opponents of the Constitution. University of Chicago Press, 1981: 10.

⁴ Duncan, Christopher M. 1994. "Men of a Different Faith: The Anti-Federalists Ideal in Early American Political Thought." *Polity* 26: 392.

⁵ Thornton, James. 1994. "Tearing Apart Our Moral Fabric." *The New American*, April.

⁶ Duncan, 394.

⁷ Duncan, 392.

⁸ www.adl.org

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